

Somerville School Construction Advisory Group (CAG) Synthesis of Initial CAG Recommendation

Background

Since 2022, the City has been examining the needs for school building development. Among those efforts has been an exploration of the facility challenges at our two oldest schools: the Benjamin G. Brown School and the Winter Hill Community Innovation School (WHCIS). To address these challenges, the City filed two Statements of Interest with the Massachusetts School Building Authority (MSBA) to seek state funding for these two buildings.

In December 2023, the MSBA notified Somerville that the Winter Hill SOI was invited into the Eligibility phase of the MSBA process. Although the Brown School was not specifically accepted into the program, the MSBA expressed willingness to consider a single project that accommodates both the Winter Hill and Brown school populations at this time.

Because this question has significant implications for the families in those areas, for the Somerville Public Schools, and for the City overall, the City committed to a broad community process to allow Somerville parents / guardians, educators, and community members to meaningfully weigh in on whether the MSBA process to renovate or rebuild the Winter Hill school will also serve the Brown School community, and if not, how the City might address the facility needs for the school.

This process centers on the development of a Construction Advisory Group (Advisory Group), made up of representatives with a range of perspectives across the City, to deliberate and align on a path forward, and 2) a broad public process to outreach to and engage the Somerville public through a survey and set of focus groups.

(Add more on Process to final report)

Synthesis of CAG Recommendations to Date

After the October 2025 meeting, CAG members were invited to share their current recommendations for the location and size of the MSBA-supported school, what factors are most important, and what other considerations should be addressed. Eleven CAG members shared their thoughts, which are synthesized below.

Location Recommendation:

There was unanimous agreement supporting the **Sycamore Street site** as the location for the new school. One member personally preferred the Trum location but understood that overwhelming community dislike of this option would doom a debt exclusion vote.

Size Recommendation

The majority of CAG members expressed a preference toward building a **larger school** that could accommodate the current enrollment of Winter Hill and the Brown school, with some additional flexibility for future growth. Many members suggested that the City build as large a school as MSBA will allow, though one respondent suggested keeping the size a bit smaller (~700 seats) and a request for SPS/School Committee to determine districting and programming. One respondent recommended rebuilding *only* the Winter Hill school at Sycamore while completing ADA and building improvements at the Brown school at its current location, and one did not definitively offer a suggestion on size.

Major Factors Influencing the Recommendation

Support for the Sycamore Street location was primarily based on the widespread community opposition to building at Trum Field across all demographic and stakeholder groups, as well as permitting challenges, timeline and safety concerns, and possible complications related to the field swap. The member who preferred Trum raised deep concerns that the Sycamore site is viable for the size of the project, while Trum had plenty of space, fewer abutters, and the ability to create on-site parking and access roads.

Respondents highlighted a range of factors influencing their support for a larger school at Sycamore Street, including:

- **Cost and Funding:** Maximizing state funding (MSBA reimbursement), reducing overall cost, taking advantage of the opportunity for more capacity, and significant concern about the success of a second debt exclusion vote were frequently cited as the highest priority motivators. Some mentioned that the lower overall costs raised the potential of freeing resources for other services and programs across SPS, and allowed the City to prioritize its resources for a larger number of students.
- **Facilities and Amenities:** Offsetting serious facility deficiencies at the Brown school, such as decaying conditions, risk of structural collapse, accessibility for students and staff with physical disabilities, and lack of a cafeteria or gymnasium, were noted by several respondents. Members also highlighted the educational and community potential of a larger building, designed for district (e.g., AIM) needs and for the future, with more amenities for a safe and quality learning environment for all students, as well as for community purposes.
- **Equity and Consistency of Educational Model:** A few members saw this as an opportunity to bring all schools into alignment with the city's K-8 schooling model, which promoted more educational equity/uniformity across the city. It was also seen by some as an opportunity for greater mixing of racial, socio-economic, and ability levels, which could improve the learning environments and experiences of all students.

- **Efficiency and Other Benefits:** Saving staff time by taking on only one project, reducing carbon emissions by avoiding ongoing maintenance of two old buildings, and having extra room for swing space and flexibility in the District were also noted as relevant factors.

The member supporting the option to rebuild WHCIS without additional capacity cited concerns about a 900 seat school being excessive, and raised concerns about traffic congestion associated with drop-off/pickup at Sycamore and walkability issues for those in the Brown school area.

The member suggesting the 700-person option saw it as a way to create extra flexibility without building an anomalously large school, and suggested that the CAG should not support closing the Brown school without direct SPS/School Committee direction on their vision for the district.

How To Make Options More Appealing

Members suggested a range of concerns that should be addressed to make the larger school option more appealing and responsive to community concerns. These include:

- **School Size and Unique Configuration:** Many members acknowledged community concerns about the large size of the school and fears that it would be overwhelming for students, especially those in the AIM program. They also noted that rebuilding the larger school would mean the loss of the district's only K-5 option, which is beloved by the families that attend.
- **Transportation, Traffic, and Walkability:** A key concern was transportation and safe routes to school for families whose student will no longer be close enough to walk to a proximity school, and the resulting increase in traffic and congestion around Sycamore.
- **Lost/Changed School Communities:** Several respondents noted the preferences of many families in the WHCIS and Brown communities to keep their schools separate. Some also noted the potential for second-order effects that might draw families across the district to different schools, both during (to avoid Edgerly/future transitions) and after (to attend closer or more appealing schools) the reconstruction process.
- **Community Distrust:** A few members highlighted lack of trust in the City and District's process to date, including concerns about lack of transparency and due diligence about alternative locations, missed opportunities for providing more viable location options, consideration of other programming options (like a middle-school), and engaging broader district-wide visioning on the education system and its needs.
- **Job Loss:** One member noted concerns about current SPS staff who might lose their jobs.

In order to address these issues, members suggested the following:

- **Restricting and Transportation Planning:** The City should consider how proximity schools might be adjusted and develop a transportation plan evaluating new routes to school. This should include traffic mitigation and enforcement, crossing guards, biking and walking safety, and solutions for families without cars or other transportation hardships. There was also a suggestion to provide special priority for school choice for families left further away from their nearest schools.
- **Maximizing Space and Building Features:** The school should take advantage of this key opportunity to be “a campus for the school of tomorrow.” Its design should ensure that the new building feels small and not overwhelming. Specific design ideas include: separate wings and entry/exit points, effective noise reduction, flow control, in-classroom (for pre-K and K) and private/gender-neutral bathrooms, sustainable design and operation, specialized classrooms, flexible spaces, and safe and efficient internet connectivity. It should be shaped from the outset with the needs of the AIM program in mind. It should also include opportunities to serve the whole community, with features like a gym and auditorium, meeting hall, and maximized outdoor/playground space.
- **Community Engagement and Outreach:** There were several suggestions for ways to build support and overcome community distrust, including: giving the Brown and Winter Hill communities a seat at the table during the planning phase, engaging in personal community outreach, and acknowledging procedural flaws to date. One member suggested that SPS and City leaders work with the community and other groups to build bridges between schools and families - as they do today - to prepare for building the community for the new school.
- **Educational Vision and Planning:** Many suggested the need for a compelling and clear vision from the District and School Committee regarding the future of SPS, which would address programming, grade spans, redistricting/school assignments, program placement (like AIM), and a district-wide conversation on enrollment equity. A positive vision for the district should be shared widely with the public. There was also a suggestion for a phasing/ transition plan for addressing enrollment changes, including how to maintain vibrancy at WHCIS@Edgerly and phase out programming at Brown - perhaps providing special perks like priority for after-school or summer camp enrollment or first High School course choice. Lastly, there was a suggestion to commit to working with unions to reassign and maintain all staff positions.
- **Planning for the Brown Building:** Several members reiterated the need for a plan for the future of the Brown school building - whether it will be maintained, repurposed, or redeveloped— that can alleviate concern and demonstrate political commitment, transparency, and creativity in long-term school planning. One member suggested keeping it City-Owned and occupied with an active, community-focused use.

Two members recommended investing now in the needed ADA and facility upgrades for the Brown building regardless of MSBA funding, and one of those added a call to address ADA compliance in all school facilities.

Additional Considerations and Things to Include

Members offered the following additional recommendations:

- **Avoid Polarizing Framing:** One member wrote passionately about avoiding generalizations about the demographics, resource levels, or academic performance of one school over another, noting that all Somerville schools have different types of imbalances and inequities. The member suggested instead demanding that School Committee and District Leadership focus on transfer teaching practices and replicate success stories from one school to the next, rather than expecting that mergers or changes in population will be the ticket out of underperformance.
- **Adjust for Leadership Changes:** One member suggested that the CAG immediately invite the Mayor elect to our next meeting, and postpone finalizing the decision, continuing the CAG in 2026 with the participation of the new Mayor.
- **Acknowledge Pain:** A few members recommended acknowledging how painful the displacement and slow rebuilding experience has been for WHCIS families, including how uncertainty has reduced enrollment at the school in the last few years.
- **Keep Alternatives Alive:** The member who raised concerns about the viability of Sycamore Street advised the City to keep back-up plans available as long as possible given the many unknowns about the scope and cost of the proposed options. They also urged the City to speak proactively and energetically about the transformative power of good of this project to build more support
- **Fund Improvements at all SPS Schools.** One member suggested that the City push a second simultaneous debt exclusion for ~\$120 Million (the estimated savings in debt service for a larger MSBA project) to cover safety, health, and improved building quality for all other SPS schools.